

## Chapter 9

# ‘Where things meet in the world between sea and land’: Human-Whale Encounters in Littoral Space

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### Constructing Littoral Space: Sites, Practices and Agents

Whales have a long history of interaction with human coast-dwelling communities. As whales have continued to approach the same regions on the Atlantic and Pacific shores in the course of their long-distance oceanic pilgrimages, they have become sources of food and fuel, mythological and literary figures and, finally, symbols of human ruthlessness and ecological endangerment. Some recent creative works, notably Witi Ihimaera’s novel *The Whale Rider* (1987, 2005), Niki Caro’s film adaptation *Whale Rider* (2002) and Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale* (2008), depict this complex web of human-cetacean relations, paying particular attention to indigenous coastal communities’ negotiations of tradition, economic viability and cultural regeneration predicated on their connection to whales. These encounters between humans and whales happen in what I will be calling ‘littoral space’: the interconnected terrestrial and maritime space on both sides of the shoreline. In the works under consideration here, littoral space includes various sites: the beach, the strip of land between – and close to – the tidelines, the human dwelling places nearby, the coastal waters including the fishing grounds, and the immediate hinterland. Such sites are not simply ‘there’: they are constituted both materially and symbolically through the interactions of the various human and non-human inhabitants of littoral space. In this essay, I look at the way encounters between humans and whales – specifically, whale strandings and the resumption of indigenous subsistence whaling – shape the conceptualisation of littoral space in postcolonial fiction and film.

Encounters with animals play a major role for human practices within littoral space.<sup>1</sup> Shore dwellers and visitors alike engage with marine and coastal animals on a multitude of levels – the cultural, the aesthetic, the material and the economic. Many origin myths of coastal peoples feature animals as creators, ancestors, protectors and totem animals, and they continue to provide a frame of reference for modern experiences of, and narratives about, the shore. At the same time, fish,

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<sup>1</sup> These are not always pleasurable and regenerative. For an analysis of human-animal encounters based on fear and abjection, see Kluwick’s contribution on the subject of sharks in this volume.

shellfish and cetaceans have always been a source of sustenance and wealth for littoral communities. Conversely, the continuing decimation of marine fauna is one of the causes for economic decline that is only in some regions compensated by the rise of tourism.<sup>2</sup> The progressive imbalance between the various shoreside populations – an overabundance of human coast dwellers and seasonal visitors, a scarcity of animals that sustain, or used to sustain, littoral communities – constitutes an important aspect of the ecological discourse on the seashore.<sup>3</sup> Increased settlement of the seashore has resulted not only in a transformation of its physical geography but, equally importantly, in a change of the social composition and economic basis of coastal communities. In consequence, social practices and, with them, the cultural meanings of the seaside have changed as well.

In its use of the term 'practice', this essay follows Henri Lefebvre's assumption that social practice and social space co-emerge and constitute each other's meaning (73). In this sense, practice is both 'conservative', containing the memory of how things were done in the past, and open to new gestures and actions: 'Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others' (73). However, Lefebvre defines 'practice' somewhat narrowly as 'labour' in the Marxist sense (69), thereby excluding the agency of nature. For Lefebvre, space is a social product. Nature, in consequence, 'is now seen as merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces' (31). It is in this respect that his spatial theory appears most dated. As Bruno Latour has since persuasively argued, agency cannot be restricted to social labour, nor can (Western) culture be seen as the exclusive bearer of agency. Lefebvre implicitly subscribes to the logic of what Latour called 'the Great Divide', 'the absolute dichotomy between the order of Nature and that of Society' (Latour 40), a logic that aligns modern Western culture on one side of the divide and so-called primitive peoples, animals and nature on the other. It is precisely this dichotomy that is critically questioned in the texts under consideration here. An understanding of how littoral space is constituted through the interaction of various human and non-human agents thus warrants a more inclusive view of 'practices of everyday life', as developed for instance by Michel de Certeau in relation to walking in the city as a 'speech act' (91–9). Accordingly, littoral space is the result of past and present practices such as fishing, whaling, recreation, traffic, building and storytelling. Individual and collective agents have a certain, albeit not unlimited, range of possibilities to reinterpret these practices and perform them in new, creative ways.

<sup>2</sup> The biodiversity of coastal regions, and a resulting diet rich in proteins and nutrients such as iodine, has always attracted humans to the seashore (see Gillis 32). In consequence, the depletion of the seas hits fishing communities particularly hard. For an analysis of the conflicting interests of fishermen and environmentalists, see Johnson.

<sup>3</sup> Non-fictional ecological writings about the sea and the shore have a long tradition; see, for example, Rachel Carson's seminal texts *The Sea around Us* (1951) and *The Edge of the Sea* (1998). On the global increase of coastal populations, see Gillis 1. Today, shore settlements are also endangered by climate change and the resulting rise of the sea level; see Weik von Mossner's contribution in this volume.

As will be shown below, agency in littoral space – at least where the creative works discussed here are concerned – is not restricted to human agents: animals and even the sea itself 'do' things – move around, transform the material space – and in that sense have agency.

Whales have always had a special status for many littoral cultures. In the myths of both the Makah and the Māori, the collective protagonists of Hogan's and Ihimaera's novels discussed below, whales figure as the ancestors of the coastal people in question. Similar mythical narratives and rituals appear across many coastal cultures (see Van Ginkel). However, the conceptualisations of and concrete interactions with the world's largest mammals not only differ in various cultures, they have also changed significantly over the last couple of centuries, not least due to the dramatic decimation of cetaceans during that period. Whaling, in the nineteenth century 'an extractive industry of global scope' (Buell 205) famously anatomised in Melville's *Moby-Dick*,<sup>4</sup> supplied raw material that literally fuelled the industrial revolution.<sup>5</sup> Due to technological developments such as the invention of the grenade harpoon, whaling reached a truly planetary scale between the 1920s and 1960s and resulted in the near-extinction of many cetacean species. For example, blue whales, the largest cetacean species, were decimated: 'In all, more than 350,000 blue whales were killed in the south; by 1958 there were only 4,000 left in all the southern oceans' (Roman 143). Rather belatedly, the status of whales in public discourse has changed; cetaceans are now recognised for their 'importance both as part of the marine ecosystem and as a symbol of past excess and newfound respect for the earth' (Johnson 4). Whaling has become a highly contested practice, openly pursued by only a few nations under the guise of scientific interest.<sup>6</sup> Concomitantly, whales have been reconceptualised, from dangerous leviathans and sources of whale oil and baleen to highly intelligent, friendly and endangered fellow mammals.

Today, the whale has become one of the iconic animals of conservationism:

In post-industrial cultures today – with some obvious exceptions – whales are protected collectively because the rarity of some species vividly embodies the fragility of ecological biodiversity. And individual cetacean lives are valued

<sup>4</sup> Melville's *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, first published in 1851, continues to provide an important frame of reference for cultural studies on cetaceans. See, in particular, Hoare's *Leviathan or, The Whale*.

<sup>5</sup> On the history of whaling and the importance of whale oil and baleen for industrial production, see Hoare; Roman; Dolin; Francis; and Mawer. On current controversies, see Kalland.

<sup>6</sup> In 1986, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) introduced zero catch limits for commercial whaling, allowing only a few exceptions, especially for indigenous subsistence whaling, the legal grounds for the Makah whale hunt. However, the IWC also authorises national governments to grant special permits 'to kill, take and treat whales for purposes of scientific research' (IWC Resolution 1986-2), the basis for the continued whaling of nations such as Japan and Russia. On the Japanese position, which is more complex than usually represented in international media, see Watanabe.

because their mammalian characteristics, along with their purported intelligence and benignity, invite in humans a sense of kinship all the more distinctive because it coexists with other features that embody radical otherness: their sometimes colossal proportions; their morphological similarity to an utterly different order of creatures; their occupation of an 'alien world' in the oceans. (Armstrong 104)

Even former whale-hunting countries, such as New Zealand, have enlisted in the ranks of cetacean conservationists, acknowledging that the whale is not only a valuable member of the marine ecosystem but also part of the nation's cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup>

While many of these processes unfolded on the high seas – or were decided upon in far-away boardrooms – rather than close to the shore, the history of whaling has had a deep impact on life in littoral space. Coastal communities have had to adapt to the disappearance of the whale as well as to its changed symbolic meaning. In many coastal towns, whale watching has become a major source of income and, in fact, an important factor in global seaside tourism.<sup>8</sup> The inhabitants of such places – for instance, Hermanus on South Africa's western Cape, the setting of Zakes Mda's novel *The Whale Caller*<sup>9</sup> – have to reconcile the various historical and narrative layers that produced the current image of the fishing village as traditional, and set apart from modernity (see Gillis 77–8), with the contemporary exigencies of economic survival. The latter demand precisely such a romanticisation of the past and of the shore as an unspoiled natural space to attract sufficient numbers of visitors. In the case of coastal towns and villages whose populations are of predominantly non-European descent, a history of cultural and political expropriation, which in part obliterated indigenous traditions further, complicates the communities' attempts at a viable redeployment of their forces in cultural as well as economic terms.

Contemporary creative treatments of non-Western communal life on the seashore emphasise the complex positioning of such communities as – willing or reluctant – participants in processes of globalisation, consumerism, and catering for the tourist industry while simultaneously engaging in contested efforts to reconstruct their identity and recapture agency under such new conditions. In a spate of recent novels, it is the various communities' relationship not only to the sea – as a source of life and cultural origins – but also to whales that provides

<sup>7</sup> See the exhibition on *Whales/Tohorā* organised by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, now on tour internationally (*Whales/Tohorā*).

<sup>8</sup> Starting in the 1950s, seaside visitors have been attracted in growing numbers to watch migrating whales. According to Roman, eighty-seven countries host whale-watching excursions, and nine million people went whale watching in 1998 alone, 'spending more than a billion dollars on tours, tickets and souvenirs' (171). As conservationists argue, 'the value of seeing a whale brings in more tourist dollars than a dead one ever could' (171).

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Ihimaera's and Hogan's fictions discussed below, Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005) is frequently named as a third in this by now almost classical group of postcolonial cetacean novels. For a reading of Mda's novel in the context of South African beach fictions, see Samuelson's contribution in this volume.

a focal point for attempts at collective rebirth and redemption. The fictions and film by Ihimaera, Caro and Hogan considered here do not simply posit modernity and tradition as mutually exclusive terms. Rather, in each case the functions of traditional narratives, rites and roles have to be renegotiated under the conditions of a modernity that entails unemployment, poverty and lack of political empowerment. In the coastal communities of the Māori of New Zealand and the Makah of the American Pacific Northwest – fictionalised as the A'atsika tribe in Hogan's novel – marine myths of origin and, in particular, each people's relationship with whales play a central role. However, it is not the aim of this essay to engage with Māori and Makah culture from an anthropological perspective – mythology only plays a role in so far as it is invoked through the magical realist mode employed in the fiction. Rather, the two novels and Caro's film will be considered as narratives that address precisely the interaction between present material conditions of life, the diegetic use and often conflicting interpretation of whale-centred mythology and tradition, and the communities' specific topographic location on the shore.

As Stenwand has pointed out, Ihimaera and Hogan, while addressing the plight of the respective ethnic groups from an informed inside perspective,<sup>10</sup> also aim at engaging an international audience: they 'negotiate their liminal positions as cosmopolitan global cultural ambassadors with specific connections that allow them access to the lives of the insiders who dwell more permanently in the localities in question. Their audiences also include cosmopolitan readers lured by the postcolonial and the ecopastoral exotic' (185). A divergent position is stressed, however, by Huang who reads *The Whale Rider* and *People of the Whale*, together with the novel *Eyes in the Sky* by Tao author Syaman Rapongan (2012), as examples of a 'transpacific and transindigenous ecopoetics' (121). This entails that the Great Divide between human and non-human animals underpinning Western conceptions of the natural world, as described by Latour, be replaced by a multispecies continuum: 'The interchanges between the human and ocean species shape the multiple, divergent communities of the waters. The boundary – or, rather, the binary relationship – between human and nonhuman is perpetually blurred in the presence of a multispecies world' (Huang 128). Whales, as marine mammals and mythical ancestors of the human communities, are to a high degree representative of this erasure of the divide between the human and the natural world. Through the invocation of myth and the description of close encounters with the creatures, the novels offer redemption to 'human animals, giving them a place in the cosmos, and materialize the dialogues between human and sea animals' (127).

The idea of the shore as a place of regeneration is thus approached from a different angle to that of Western views that are predicated on the separation between civilised and natural space. Nevertheless, the transindigenous position claimed by Huang intersects, I would like to suggest, with an emplacement in the modern world of globalised traffic, trade and tourism, thus creating a

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Hogan is a member of the Chickasaw Nation. Her work covers the life of Native Americans in various parts of the USA. Witi Ihimaera is of Māori descent and is considered the first Māori writer to publish a novel (*Tangi*, 1973).

'hypercomplex' space in which, according to Lefebvre, various concrete places – the local, the national, the worldwide – are 'intercalated, combined, superimposed' and 'traversed by myriad currents' (88). In other words, littoral space, which forms the focus of my following discussion of Ihimaera, Caro and Hogan, is constituted by the practices of local agents but also impacted by events elsewhere – in the remote metropolis as well as the deep ocean.

As stated at the beginning, littoral space is not a uniform site but can be subdivided into different topographical areas, such as the beach, the coastal waters and the land near the shore. These areas differ not only materially, for instance regarding their geological structure, but also in respect of their use: different agents do different things on, say, the beach and in the water. In the three examples considered here, the beach, the inhabited shore and the sea are constructed in distinct ways. In particular, there is a striking contrast between the conceptualisations of the beach in Ihimaera's novel and Caro's film. This is due partly to the different exigencies and possibilities of the respective media but also to the distinct marketing needs of the film, an international co-production, on the one hand and of the novel on the other.<sup>11</sup> All three examples place their emphasis on the life of the coastal communities in question and on individuals for whom the beach functions as a theatre of their alienation from, as well as reconciliation with and reintegration into, the multispecies natural world. However, in varying degrees these communities are shown to be part of a modern nation state and of an international geopolitical constellation, an interaction effected partly through media such as television and newspapers. One function of the media in Hogan's and Ihimaera's novels is to reflect on the constructedness and the contested quality of tradition – significantly, this is a dimension missing from the film where tradition is naturalised. Through the various movements, acts and discursive exchanges on, through and beyond its topographies, littoral space emerges as a complex site that, like the beach itself, undergoes constant change.

### Whales on the Beach: Ihimaera's and Caro's Versions of *Whale Rider*

While beached whales used to signify bounty or spectacle,<sup>12</sup> today they stand for an ecological disaster that is not fully understood. It may be man-made, the effect

<sup>11</sup> The success of the film has, however, influenced the marketing strategies of the novel as well. As Eckstein has shown, the novel was reissued and, in fact, rewritten by Ihimaera to make it more accessible to an international audience. The edition referred to in this essay is the most widely available 'international' Heinemann edition of 2005, in which some of the Māori terms used in the original have been replaced, without acknowledgement, by English translations.

<sup>12</sup> As Roman notes, for the Māori as well as other coastal peoples, 'stranded whales once provided a vast amount of meat and oil, a gift from the god of the sea' (179). In Europe, beached whales were a spectacle that attracted the curious, and, in fact, their carcasses were the first specimens of cetaceans that could be examined in full by naturalists (see Hoare 253–4).



of sound pollution,<sup>13</sup> but it has the impact of an inexplicable tragedy. For whales, the beach is a thanatotope: they come to the beach only to die, thus profoundly disturbing our vision of the beach as a site of regeneration. In view of the drastic decimation of some cetacean species, mass strandings constitute a significant threat to their genetic diversity and, in the long run, their chances of survival. With the reconceptualisation of whales from human prey to objects of environmental engagement, these fatal mishaps engage the affects of human beholders on various levels: empathy, ecological and practical concerns (how to dispose of the huge carcasses?), as well as sensationalism. The emotional power of these huge creatures, lying helplessly on the beach and dying slowly if they do not receive human help certainly contributed to the international success of the film *Whale Rider* directed by Niki Caro, a low-budget New Zealand-German co-production. The film culminates in a sequence in which the people of Whangara try to save a pod of beached southern right whales. The rescue operation is only successful when Pai (short for Paikea), an eleven-year-old Māori girl – a direct descendent of the mythical ancestor Paikea who came to shore on the back of a whale – rides the alpha whale back into the surf. She almost drowns in the process but is miraculously saved and finally recognised by her grandfather Koro Apirana as Paikea's true heir.

Whangara is situated close to the sea. Several scenes in *Whale Rider* take place on the beach, culminating in the dramatic stranding and subsequent rescue of the whales. But despite the prominence of this setting, the people's ancient association with the ocean has been weakened. As Mack has stressed, the account of their maritime origins continues to be crucial for the Māoris' present sense of identity: 'Such assertion of ancestral connection to the sea is in itself one of the ways in which people "inhabit" it, even if they are otherwise largely terrestrial' (18). In the film, however, only Pai and her grandfather exhibit this connection. The beach as part of the littoral space that connects the now terrestrial people of Whangara with their maritime past has to be regained. Nor is the seashore depicted as a workplace: only Koro is seen to be working on a boat, if not actually fishing.<sup>14</sup> With few exceptions, the inhabitants of Whangara do not seem to know what to make of their proximity to the ocean: 'The beach in *Whale Rider* ... encapsulates the intermediate, boundary state that characterises the local community trapped between modernity and primitivism, culture and nature' (Leotta 127). The meaning of the beach is reduced to a single dimension: it is a place of waiting. The film thus disregards other functions of littoral space, as a workplace, a dwelling and so on. The Whangaras' alienation from the ocean is shown metaphorically: the ceremonial canoe Pai's artist father had started to carve has never been finished; an initiation rite in the sea fails, partly because the candidates cannot swim, partly because they lack the stamina to dive deep enough to retrieve the symbol of

<sup>13</sup> On anthropogenic noise as a possible cause of whale strandings, see Hoare 304–5.

<sup>14</sup> According to Leotta, in films made by Māori directors such as Barry Barclay the beach is depicted as a workplace (107), partly to counter the earlier stereotype of 'happy Māori' living in an ahistorical space unconnected to the real New Zealand (24).

leadership, a *rei puta* (a pendant carved from a whale tooth) Koro had thrown overboard to determine the future leader.

Among the younger generation, Pai is the only one who is shown to be close to the sea, often sitting on the beach and contemplating the ocean. She is also the only one who succeeds in completing the tasks in which all others fail, including – in secret – the retrieval of the *rei puta*. But her relationship to the sea is deeper and mystical: repeated juxtaposition of underwater whale footage and close-ups of her face suggests that she is able to hear the whales, and conversely it is in response to her call that they come to the beach. It is in fact Pai's spiritual connection to the whales that causes the catastrophe; it is her self-sacrifice that averts it. This constitutes a major departure from Ihimaera's novel, where the whales' behaviour has both a modern and a mythical cause: on the one hand, they are disoriented by human intervention in the marine ecosystem, specifically nuclear testing in the Pacific (44); on the other hand, their leader, the original whale of the myth, is driven by his mourning for his 'golden master' Paieka (45). The social structure of this whale population reduplicates the patriarchal organisation of Whangara, with the alpha whale's nostalgia and stubbornness leading to a similar near-catastrophe as Koro's traditionalism. For Pai, who claims agency and female leadership<sup>15</sup> by virtue of her ride on the whale, the beach enables multiple positive transgressions of boundaries: the union between an animal living in the sea and an earthbound human being, between nature and culture, between the sacred past and the profane present, between patriarchy and the reinterpretation of tradition from a female point of view. The result of Pai's seaward ride that reverses the whales' movement onto the beach is the moral renewal of the community and its ancient relationship with the ocean, a happy ending that has been applauded by audiences all over the world.

However, *Whale Rider* has also been sharply criticised from a postcolonial point of view. Critics such as Prentice or Hokowhitu have pointed to the absence of any political and social context. The villagers' troubles seem to be due to their neglect of tradition rather than a long history of colonisation and dispossession, or to more recent factors such as economic and educational disadvantage. Whereas, as Prentice has argued, there is a high investment in the referentiality and 'authenticity' of the location and the cast, the film's worldwide success can partly be explained by its efficient positioning of the non-materialist lifestyle and communal values of Whangara for aesthetic consumption by a global audience. In other words, the film has been so successful precisely because it grafts a Western notion of the beach – as a natural space opposed to modern, urbanised spaces – onto its representation of a Māori community. This includes what Prentice calls the 'fetishisation of landscape' through the camera work, experienced vicariously through 'the virtual tourism of the film' or the real tourism promoted by many New Zealand films (261).

<sup>15</sup> See Gonick's reading of the film as a fable of female agency that resonates with audiences across different cultures: 'the figure of the girl in *Whale Rider* is used as a "glocalizing" factor, one which ties the indigenous public sphere to global cultural processes and at the same time re-articulates new discourses of agentic girlhood through its decolonizing of the screen' (310).



In short, both the community and the landscape are dehistoricised. The beach is construed as an archaic space where a mythical past can eventually be accessed. The whales play an important role as conduits for this communal healing. They stand for a living, throbbing nature that can be touched and that, despite the animals' obvious vulnerability, is the source of a tremendous power of renewal. It is significant, however, that while real footage of southern right whales was used in several scenes, the stranded whales are the results of animation technology. For the climactic beach scene, animatronic models, some with a human operator inside, were used and subsequently digitally enhanced, with very convincing results. The emotional impact of this scene cannot be disputed, although the models are smaller than actual right whales would be (see Roman 179). At the same time, however, the animatronic models, proudly presented in the documentation included on the *Whale Rider* DVD, underscore both the ecological consciousness of the production and its technological sophistication. The result is complete control: of the film whales' response to Pai's advances and of the audience's emotional reaction. The scene that engages the viewers most deeply on an emotional level is the one that is least 'natural'.<sup>16</sup>

The politics of global consumption that determine the representation of the beach and whales in *Whale Rider* become even more evident if the film adaptation is compared to Ihimaera's novel. In the film, Pai is the main focaliser and speaks the voice-over that introduces the myth of the whale rider, thus establishing a 'rhetoric of the natural' (Prentice 259). Not least because of this adoption of a young person's perspective, 'Whangara assumes many of the characteristics of a Disney fantasyland – a timeless, childlike world, free from the hegemony of the powerful adult' (Hokuwhitu 128). By contrast, in the book, the narrative is told by her uncle Rawiri, in other words from an experienced, adult perspective. It is through Rawiri that the community is connected to a wider South Pacific network of travel, labour and cultural exchange. In fact, it is this figure that has undergone the greatest transformation in the adaptation. Whereas in the film Rawiri is completely passive and only reluctantly discloses his potential as Pai's mentor and an important member of the community, in the novel he is conspicuously associated with modernity, mobility and the wider world: he is a biker, a zealous worker, and he has just returned from a four-year stay in Australia and Papua New Guinea – the very opposite of the film's stay-at-home, amiable sluggard.

Like the film, the novel culminates in the girl's (called Kahu in the book) ride on the whale, which she experiences as a re-enactment of, and a merging with, the founding myth and its protagonist:

She was the whale rider. ... She was Kahutia Te Rangi. She felt a shiver running down the whale and, instinctively, she placed her head against its skin and closed her eyes. The whale descended in the shallow dive and the water was like streaming silk. ... She was Paikea. (106)

<sup>16</sup> See also Kluwick's analysis of Spielberg's use of animatronic sharks in *Jaws*, in this volume.

Despite her mortal danger, Kahu experiences an intimate connection with the animal on whose back she rides; for a fleeting moment, the whale and the girl overcome the divide separating human from animal. Significantly – and this narrative level has not been reproduced in the film – Kahu's experience of merging, with Paikea and with the animal that carries the whale rider, is also described from the bull whale's perspective: 'Ko Paikea, ko Paikea. ... I am carrying my Lord, Paikea' (110). That this is in fact an error, and that the supposed golden master has to be restored to the surface, is spotted by the 'old mother whale' (111). It is the female whale's intervention that saves Kahu's life (whereas the girl's survival is not really explained in the film).

Like the film, the book establishes a connection between the survival of the whales and that of Whangara, and it ends on an equally hopeful note – 'the whales are still singing' (122) – but, as Huggan and Tiffin have argued, 'without suggesting that the cultural renaissance [the happy ending] implies is anything other than temporary, or that the ecological crises it alludes to are definitively resolved' (65). The happy ending is not that of a fairy tale: while magical elements such as the mother whale's intervention contribute to it, other, more naturalistic factors also play a role. Ihimaera creates a complex framework that disallows any facile acceptance of the 'mythical' solution to social problems, even while the myth is authorised as the Whangara's founding narrative through magical realist elements such as interspersed passages narrated from the whales' perspective, in which naturalistic descriptions – the whales' sonic mode of communication – are intermingled with references to the Paikea myth, suggesting that this myth is as real for the whales as it is for the Whangara:

*The bull whale had become handsome and virile, and he had loved his master. In the early days his master would play the flute and the whale would come to the call. Even in his lumbering years of age the whale would remember his adolescence and his master; at such moments he would send long, undulating songs of mourning through the lambent water. ... In a welter of sonics, the ancient bull whale would communicate his nostalgia.* (8–9; italics in original)

As this passage suggests, the bull whale who leads the pod to Whangara, and to near-certain death, is the original whale of the myth, set some millennia ago. He is driven to the fatal shore by his nostalgia for his master, the whale rider. At the same time, a different explanation is added to this magical level of the narrative – the whales are disoriented by nuclear testing in the Pacific: '*Sparkling like a galaxy was a net of radioactive death. For the first time in all the years of his leadership, the ancient whale deviated from his usual primeval route*' (45; italics in original). According to Huang, the inclusion of the whales' perspective on its mythological and modern – ecological – levels contributes to the emergence of a multispecies, rather than anthropocentric, littoral space without obliterating the environmental deterioration caused by human intervention (134).

In the film, the Paikea myth is the only frame of reference for the Māori relationship with whales: for the most part, viewers who are not familiar with

Māori culture learn about the myth from Pai's voice-over. By contrast, the novel gives more scope to the myth, which is told both from the whales' and the people's points of view but also adds a historical narrative that does not shrink from disturbing aspects such as the implication of indigenous peoples, including the Māori, in industrial whaling.<sup>17</sup> Koro is sensitive to the continuing temptation of commercialism and the ensuing dangers for both the community and the natural environment: 'We have to place prohibitions on our fishing beds, boys, otherwise it will be just like the whales – ... *Listen how empty our seas have become*' (39; emphasis in original). Koro himself contributes to this critical historicising, a stance in contrast with the film's naturalisation. Despite his present regret, Koro is still 'mesmerised' by the memory of the whale hunt in which he participated in his youth (40). His physical proximity to the whales – 'I was able to reach out and touch the skin. ... I felt the ripple of power beneath the skin. It felt like silk. Like a god'. (40) – evokes awe but does not erase the thrill of the chase, nor, naturally, does it prevent the continuation of the hunt. His touching of the whale's silk-like skin thus differs significantly from Kahu's experience; while both feel the whale's beauty, strength and divinity, the child entrusts herself completely to the marine creature whereas Koro is still ready to treat it as prey.

In addition, the killing of whales for sport is not safely confined to the past. The novel juxtaposes reverence for the marine ancestors to an approach to whales as spectacle that can take a turn toward a voyeuristic savouring of violence. Beached whales become a spectacle through the dissemination of images by the media. The ambivalent responses to strandings are explored in an episode that prefigures the culminating whale rescue and that is completely omitted in the film. Two hundred whales strand – and eventually die – on Wainui Beach, not far from Whangara. The initial stages of this event are not immediately witnessed by the narrator Rawiri but, rather, are mediated through newspaper, radio and television coverage. In fact, the novel emphasises that this is a media event as much as something really happening in the neighbourhood. The most fascinating piece of media coverage is also the most gory and repulsive:

One particular sequence of the news film will remain indelibly imprinted on our minds. The camera zooms in on one of the whales, lifted high onto the beach by the waves. ... The whale is on its side, and blood is streaming from its mouth. The whale is still alive. Five men are working on the whale. They are splattered with blood. As the helicopter hovers above them, one of the men stops his work and smiles directly into the camera. The look is triumphant. He lifts his arms in a victory sign and the camera focuses on the other men, where they stand in the surging water. The chainsaw has just completed cutting through the whale's lower jaw. The men are laughing as they wrench the jaw from the butchered whale. (79–80)

Here the beach becomes the site of deliberate killing; more than that, of the deliberate inflicting of pain on a helpless animal. The five men literally bathe in the

<sup>17</sup> See Hoare 102–3; Mawer 165–78. On hostile relations between local Māori and foreign whaling crews, see Francis 75–6.

whale's blood to recapture the visceral experience of killing big game. Rather than celebrating a fusion with nature, they underscore their mastery and the whale's status as a thing. The framing by the TV camera enhances the meaning of this act: a gesture of human dominance, of defiance. The men completely lack Koro's awe for the godlike animals he helped kill in his youth, as well as his recognition of their godlike grandeur, not to mention Kahu's merging with the animal and magical world during her ride on the whale.

It is not quite clear who these men are, but there are indications that they are also Māori, which would disrupt the binary opposition between indigenous people immersed in a multispecies community and Western people who assert their dominance over the natural world. The coastal community's response to the scene of butchery is equivocal: 'Some would have argued that in Maori terms a stranded whale was traditionally a gift from the Gods and that the actions could therefore be condoned' (80). However, this 'traditional' stance is contradicted by the 'feelings of sorrow and anger among the people on the Coast', and the love they feel 'for the beasts which had once been our companions' (80). This emotional connection to the whales – every bit as much a traditional position – is enhanced by a new ecological awareness: 'Nor was this just a question of one whale among many; this was a matter of two hundred members of a vanishing species' (80). The Māori's stance towards whales has become heterogeneous, no longer prescribed by tradition and tribal identity. Rather, the rescue party from Whangara, including Rawiri's tough biker friends, forms an ad hoc coalition with the locals from Wainui, many of whom are elderly residents of European descent: 'By that time many of the locals were out on the beach. Some of them still had their pyjamas on ... it was amazing to see them trying to stop younger men from pillaging the whales' (82). As these unlikely allies struggle together to save the whales, a new, transient community emerges that is not determined by traditions and lines of descent, but by their spontaneous reaction to the whales' plight. While their joint attempt to save the whales is ineffective, and they disperse soon after, something enduring has happened on this bloody beach. Rawiri and the boys have chosen a life-affirming practice and, concomitantly, rejected the destructive act of the five men. By doing so, they have also opted for an interpretation of littoral space that emphasises the community of living creatures, including Māori, Europeans and animals. Perhaps, this has been a first step towards the communal regeneration that is then symbolically enacted through Kahu's ride on the whale.

### Littoral Space in Hogan's *People of the Whale*

Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale* shares various features with Ihimaera's novel, not least the interweaving of magical elements with a harsh social realism. For example, a great drought in the last part of the novel is described as an ecological disaster that has dire economic consequences for the A'atsika, and simultaneously as Nature's punishment for their transgression against the whale. The drought is ended with the help of a rainmaker who transforms himself into an octopus – the

second totemic animal who plays an important role next to the grey whale. Both narrative modes are connected to the novel's setting, the North Pacific coast and the littoral village of Dark River. The prologue already highlights the importance of the sea, and of living on the shore, for the Dark River community's sense of identity:

*We live on the ocean. The ocean is a great being. The tribe has songs about the ocean, songs to the ocean. It is a place where people's eyes move horizontally because they watch the long, wide sea flow into infinity. Their eyes follow the width and length of the world. ... The nearby fishing towns are now abandoned, as is the sawmill in disrepair, the forest missing. Down the beach a ways to the south, white piles, shining piles of clam and oyster shells were left behind by the earlier people, the Mysterious Ones, who were said to have built houses of shells, perfectly pieced together. These places truly existed, the secret houses were made of shells. Royal ships once anchored there; those who kept journals said the houses were made of pearls. No one sees them now except as a memory made of words. One man passing by at sunset wrote, in 1910, that they were made of rainbows, but of course no one believed him. This was also the year the deadly influenza arrived with the white whalers. The houses of shells were covered in a mudslide that same year. (9; italics in original)*

In this opening paragraph, history, space and narrative are closely interlinked. The very corporeality of the shore dwellers, the way they move about and use their senses, is formed by the topographical disposition of ocean, shoreline, islands and human habitations. This place is thus not simply the setting of the narrative but is ascribed agency in its own right, just as the ocean is described as a living being. The endless horizon of the Pacific guides the beholders' eyes into the distance, into infinity. This temporal and spatial limitlessness suggests the dissolution of boundaries. However, it immediately becomes clear that the eternal flow of the sea does not render the inhabitants of its rim immune to historical change. On the contrary, historical and economic processes – the contact with explorers and whalers (and the diseases they bring), the economic slump suggested by the abandoned fishing villages and sawmill – as well as natural events – the mudslide – form the coast and transform the lives of those who live there. The present identity of Dark River emerges as a network of superimposed traces: the material leftovers of derelict buildings, the much less tangible memory of the mysterious shell houses, written records and oral tradition. The introductory lines of the novel thus firmly place the A'atsika people as participants in history rather than an ahistorical nature people. At the same time, Western concepts of history and time are not the only determining frames of reference. The Western idea of time as linear and countable is juxtaposed with the *longue durée* of tribal memory, passed on through oral tradition but also vulnerable to obliteration.

As for the Māori, for the A'atsika the animal populations of the coastal waters are of crucial importance, as a source of food and income, as symbolic providers of communal coherence and as ancestors and fellow creatures regarded with curiosity and affection. In the hierarchy of totem animals, the grey whale of the Northern Pacific ranks before all others: 'All their stories clung like barnacles

to the great whale, the whale they loved enough to watch pass by. They were people of the whale' (43). Through direct encounters and the repetition of the traditional narratives and rites, a rich, interconnected littoral world emerges. In former times, even killing the whale, if done in an appropriate, respectful way, did not profoundly disturb this relationship. Traditionally, the whale hunt used to be an activity in which the whole community was involved and which demanded thorough preparation, ritual cleansing, fasting and praying.<sup>18</sup> Witka, the grandfather of the novel's protagonist Thomas Witka Just, was the village's chief whale hunter and possessed an innate affinity to the ocean: 'At night he dreamed of the way it changed from day to day. They were beautiful dreams and he loved the ocean world' (19). In the present generation, however, this deep connection to the sea has been broken. Only a few individuals have stayed in touch with the old ways and with nature: the Old People who are the guardians of tradition; Thomas's wife Ruth, a professional fisherwoman who knows and loves the sea; and their son Marco, who has inherited his great-grandfather Witka's calling. Representing the A'atsikas' past, present and potential future, these persons endeavour to revive the spiritual life of the community.

The community's present crisis is in part due to the moral failure of its adult men. For the generation of Thomas Witka Just, the trauma of the Vietnam War further contributes to their state of disorientation. Thomas, missing in action for years, eschews returning to Dark River and acknowledging his son. Only when he reads in a San Francisco newspaper that, after decades of interruption, a new whale hunt – admissible, despite the IWC moratorium of 1986, as a case of aboriginal subsistence whaling – is planned does he decide to return home. He hopes that the hunt will prove to be the road to his personal salvation as well as that of his tribe: 'We are going to return, he thought. We are going to be a people again' (70). However, as Thomas eventually finds out, there is no simple dichotomy between a wrong life in modernity and a good life lived according to tradition, nor is the imagined return so easy. While the community's leaders 'argued treaty rights, and their return to tradition' (68), they are partly motivated by pecuniary interests – a secret agreement to sell the whale meat to Japan – and partly by a desire for violence for its own sake that is a legacy of their Vietnam experience.

The decision to resume whaling is opposed by the A'atsika women, with Ruth acting as their chief spokesperson. As a fisherwoman, Ruth knows the coastal waters better than the council members who work on land; like Koro in *The Whale Rider*, she knows how empty the ocean has become. She is also motivated by a genuine love for the whales and a recognition of the spiritual dimension of the world they symbolise: 'When she saw them rise and return to the sea, when she saw them breathe spray, she was aware that there was at least one god' (65). In the conflict, both parties enlist the help of the media and NGOs. Animal protection

<sup>18</sup> On the Makah whale hunt, see Van Ginkel 67–92. Linda Hogan was one of the opponents of the resumption of Makah whaling in 1999; before addressing the conflicts surrounding this event in fiction, she co-authored a non-fiction account of the controversy with Brenda Peterson, *Sightings: The Gray Whales' Mysterious Journey*. See also Schweningen 202–17.



groups intervene on behalf of the whales, while others who support the A'atsika right to hunt romanticise the supposedly primitive people: the reporters, 'especially the white men, thought the tribal hunters were men of mystery and spirit, foreign enough to their own America to be right' (68). What appears as a support of the tribe's autonomy is in fact an exoticising gesture.

When the hunt is finally carried out, it becomes an inept butchery. Far from being a communal endeavour following the ancient rites, the self-styled traditional whalers in their canoes are guided by 'speedboats and a helicopter, the pilot spotting the whales so the men wouldn't have to wait for them or search' (87). Instead of harpoons, they use automatic rifles, in fact the very guns some of them had learned to fire at human targets in Vietnam. The hunt is no longer an affair of the community but a media event that attracts various groups of onlookers: 'Newspeople and watchers from outside, from other tribes who swore later that they themselves would never whale, and the many protesters from San Francisco and thereabouts. It was a spectacle' (87). Finally, the hunters' ineptitude is revealed when they need to enlist these outsiders' help to drag 'the sand-covered, bloody, weed-covered whale up the ancient dragging beach' (91) – a public sign of failure, of their deep-seated alienation from tradition rather than their return to it. Far from restoring the A'atsika to their roots, the whale hunt further alienates them from their natural surroundings as they become aware that the sacred ties with nature have been broken, and their world has lost its spiritual dimension: 'They think about the whale and what they've done, who they have become in time, each person examining their own world. They do not feel the spirits that once lived in the fogs and clouds around them. The alive world is unfelt. They feel abandoned' (128).

The perversion of this staged return to tradition becomes obvious when it eventually transpires that Marco, who had gone missing after the hunt, had been killed by the tribal leader and main agent behind the whaling expedition, the Vietnam veteran Dwight. As one of the few who had been properly initiated in the ancient rituals, Marco, while participating in the hunt, had opposed the killing of a whale that was much too young, and he had been secretly dispatched in the confusion following the whale's death struggle. Instead of bringing the expected salvation, the disastrous whale hunt exacerbates Thomas's trauma and widens his alienation from his former life. While he remains at Dark River, he symbolically enacts his withdrawal from love and life by turning, literally, away from the sea. He occupies his grandfather Witka's house on the shore, but he builds a high fence that prevents him from seeing the sea or being seen by it: 'He builds it taller than himself so he can't see the eyes of the ocean watching him. He doesn't want to look at the creator of life, the first element' (113).

As the novel's prologue suggests, the sea has agency. Even as men draw boundaries and erect fences on land, the movement of the waves, the erosive powers of the wind, and the spiritual lure of the sea undermine anthropogenic structures of separation.<sup>19</sup> Thomas's fence does not suffice to keep the teeming

<sup>19</sup> See Weik von Mossner's comments on the detrimental effects of seawalls, in this volume.

life of the shore at bay. Even as he turns his back on the ocean, Thomas cannot avoid hearing its sounds, smelling it even as he sits in his shuttered house, and, finally, remembering his grandfather's intimate connection to the deep. Slowly, as his armour is cracked by this sensory invasion, Thomas begins to re-enact Witka's practice of diving, and he finally follows not only the path of his grandfather, his ancestors, but also of his murdered son: he seeks out the Old People to become purified, and to relearn his people's ancient practices (281). Finally his tranquillity is restored, and he is ready for a different encounter with the whale, one in which the human does not seek to be a master but recognises his creaturely vulnerability, his smallness in face of the sea:

In all the green beauty Thomas ... hears the sounds of all the life in water, the clicks and ticking, and for a while time changes. It seems he was there listening, hearing what almost amounted to words and now he no longer needs to breathe. He hears a low rumble, the kind Ruth describes, the low rumble of a whale and it comes to him and it looks at him with its wise old eye and he knows everything in that gaze. He knows how small a human is, not in size, but in other ways. As he rises to the surface, it helps him, pushes him slowly and it exhales a breath as he surfaces, too, gasping for air. ... He comes out of the water and sits down on the beach where things meet in the world between sea and land. (183)

In the deep of the ocean, immeasurable natural time supersedes linear, countable time and allows the diver to perceive the world differently: to become aware of infinity. As Thomas finally emerges from this liminal space, he not only has become whole again but also is ready to assume the role inherited from his grandfather and, paradoxically, his son, and to lead the people of Dark River into a future where they live again in harmony with nature: 'We are going to be better people. That is our job now. We are going to be good people. The ocean says we are not going to kill the whales until some year when it may be right' (183).

So far, the narrative of Thomas's redemption deploys the beach and even more so the coastal waters as a liminal space in the anthropological sense elaborated by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, as a zone into which a subject must venture to undergo a rite of passage, and then to return strengthened and transformed into his community (see Turner). Having first returned to the shore, Thomas then must move further, onto the beach and finally into the ocean. Due to the properties of water – its fluidity, the way it carries sound and filters out light, its ability to lighten bodies immersed in it – he re-emerges as a different being. The beach then becomes the site on which this transformative experience is consolidated into a social stance: Thomas is ready to convey his experience to the A'atsika. Because of the specific characteristics of littoral space such as the synaesthetic engagement of the senses on the beach, the properties of water and the dissociation from life on land experienced in the womblike depth of the ocean, it functions as a privileged site of regeneration and rebirth.

Thomas's ultimately successful search for his lost self thus follows the trajectory of many beach stories across different cultures and, in fact, seems to subscribe,

despite the novel's resistance to such labelling, to the notion of indigenous people's innate 'closeness to nature' and the possibility to return to a holistic pre-modern life.<sup>20</sup> However, this comforting story is complicated by the novel's ending. Despite Thomas's injunction to leave off whaling for the foreseeable future, a second whale hunt is decided upon. This time, the whalers have prepared themselves in the ancient ways, and the media are absent. It is, they claim, an expedition in search of strength, not of prey. Like his grandfather and his son before him, Thomas joins the crew, teaches them how to paddle, how to sing. However, the collective path to regeneration on which Thomas believes to be leading his people is closed: at the very moment when Thomas is ultimately transformed into 'something else, not one of the conquered any longer' (286) nor a conqueror, he is shot through the heart by Dwight. Although this second murder does not go unpunished, and Thomas's spiritual healing is not negated by his death – while clearly dead, he continues to be a conciliatory, ghostlike presence on the last pages of the novel – the hope of collective regeneration is undermined. As long as material interests continue to govern people's actions, a return to the past that does not take into account the burden of the present appears as ineffectual at best.

In Hogan's novel, the coastal zone is constructed as a spiritual space in which encounters between humans and animals outside a framework of violence and exploitation can be achieved. For people like Ruth, and Thomas in the last stage of his life, to see and to listen to the creatures of the sea opens a window to a sacred dimension of the world and allows them to overcome the binary divide between human and non-human animals. At the same time, however, the novel insists on the social dimension of littoral space which often cuts across this holistic vision. History and the material conditions of life substantially determine the practices and attitudes of coastal communities, and render the hoped-for return to nature a precarious endeavour. As in Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, the beach in *People of the Whale* is simultaneously a liminal space in which transformation and regeneration are possible, and a site of violence against animals. While Caro's film focuses too exclusively on the regenerative dimension of littoral space at the expense of social reality, the two novels show a greater degree of scepticism about attempts to construct the beach as a site where the return to nature and nature-based traditions will be instrumental in overcoming social ills. Nevertheless, Hogan's and Ihimaera's novels hold out the hope that a multispecies community of the waters is not beyond human reach. Both present littoral space as a complex site where human practices and the forces of nature meet and mix, just as the sea and the land do on the beach.

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<sup>20</sup> Throughout her work, Hogan explores the relationship between humans and the natural world while resisting the stereotyping of Native Americans as 'keepers of the land'. For various studies on her earlier writings, see Cook.

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